

BHA BRIEFING 2010: Lords Debate Secularism

Thursday 18th March

Briefing from the British Humanist Association (BHA):

Lord Harrison's Debate on the British Humanist Association's reports: *Quality and Equality: Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations* and *The Case for Secularism: A Neutral State in an Open Society*

The Case for Secularism: A Neutral State in an Open Society (BHA, 2007)

Available to buy from the BHA website www.humanism.org.uk/shop or in pdf format from Naomi Phillips, naomi@humanism.org.uk.

The Case for Secularism: a neutral state in an open society argues for the secular approach in ways intended to appeal both to humanists and to religious believers.

The BHA published *The Case for Secularism* as an invitation to debate to all those who are concerned with the question of how our increasingly diverse society can live at ease with itself in a spirit of equality and justice – a question which calls us all to serious thought.

The arguments presented for secularism seek in part to dispel the damaging myth that secularists' secularism springs from anti-religious feeling or that it is only humanists who are in favour of secularism. We believe these two misconceptions have been damaging to the debate around the place of religion in the state and need to be addressed.

We believe that the case for secularism is strong and it only grows stronger with the increasing diversity of society. If we are all to have full enjoyment of the benefits of human rights, democracy, and equality before the law, we must ensure that our religious and philosophical differences are never allowed to compromise our shared lives as citizens and neighbours. Humanists are convinced that only a secular state can provide the common framework required for public life in an open society.

The Case for Secularism encourages rational debate about what secularism is, why it is of value in our 21st century society and why it must be defended. From that framework, "flashpoint" issues such as abortion laws, state-funded faith schools, or debates about the place of Bishops in the House of Lords can be explored in a wider context.

Quality and Equality: Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations (BHA, 2007)

Available to download from the BHA website <http://tinyurl.com/publicservicesreport>, and report and executive summary available in hardcopy or pdf format from Naomi Phillips, naomi@humanism.org.uk.

Quality and Equality: Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations is a major report into the contracting out of public services to religious organisations. The launch of the report was supported by the TUC and its conclusions endorsed by public figures including Lord Warner, former minister at the Department of Health.

The report's findings demonstrate that there is no evidence that religious organisations offer any distinctive benefits to the supply and provision of public services and suggest that expanding the role of religious organisations within the public services runs the risk of lowering standards, increasing inequalities, introducing 'parallel services' and damaging social cohesion.

Quality and Equality draws attention to our concerns about the current policy to make religion a central feature in the provision and delivery of a wide range of public services. The report makes clear the BHA's position that the most fair and most inclusive services – for service users of all faiths and none – are secular services.

The report sets out the problems for employees and service users, the risks of discrimination and inequality, the damage to social cohesion and the infringements on human rights, which will arise from a policy of contracting out public services to religious organisations.

It cannot be right that any provider of public services is permitted by law to discriminate in employment policies or in the manner in which it provides statutory, state funded public services.

Quality and Equality calls for secular and inclusive services and recommends a more transparent tendering process for religious organisations contracted into public service supply and delivery. In addition, it highlights the need for legislative change to ensure that organisations providing public services:

- could not discriminate between service users on grounds of ‘religion or belief’, or on any other grounds;
- must respect the human rights of service users;
- have equality-based employment policies, so that no one is privileged for a position because of her religion or belief, her sexual orientation, or on any other irrelevant ground.

Many of the concerns detailed in *Quality and Equality* have been taken up and discussed in the context of the Equality Bill, in both Houses of Parliament. You can access detailed briefings on equality in employment, in service provision and on the new public sector duty as it applies to religion or belief from the BHA website: www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/equalities/articles-and-submissions, or from Naomi Phillips, naomi@humanism.org.uk.

About us

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity representing and supporting the non-religious and campaigning for an end to religious privilege and discrimination based on religion or belief. It is the largest organisation in the UK campaigning for a secular state. Our expertise lies in the ‘religion or belief’ equality strand, which includes non-religious beliefs such as Humanism, and how that strand relates to and intersects with other protected characteristics.

For more detail and evidence on our position, please contact:

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